

Gables center gives lesbians family rate

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-- LISA DeTOURNAY, Coral Gables resident

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A lesbian couple on Wednesday won the right to buy a family membership at Coral Gables' youth center, following a dispute that lasted more than six weeks.

Lisa DeTournay, 40, and her 43-year-old partner, physicians raising four children together, were denied a family membership at the city's War Memorial Youth Center on University Drive last month because they are not husband and wife.

"I was incredulous," DeTournay said. "We are successful people. We have a nice home. Our children are in private schools."

The city revised its policy Wednesday, citing the Miami-Dade County human rights ordinance, which outlaws discrimination against gay men and lesbians.

"We are going to do whatever it is to make it right," said Parks and Recreation Director Joe Abel.

The couple applied for membership in May, expecting to pay the \$399 "family rate."

No dice.

“Family consists of husband, wife and all dependent children through age 17,” Abel told the couple in a denial letter. “Staff apologizes for any inconvenience this may cause you, but the department operates under these guidelines for all membership categories and definitions at this time.”

The pair, who have lived in the Gables for more than a decade, could have joined for close to \$800, he said. Abel said he based the decision on a 1999 resolution on family membership fees passed by the City Commission.

“I know that the state law doesn't recognize same-sex marriages, but I didn't use that in my decision,” he said.

Abel also said it was the first time he had heard anyone question the policy.

For residents, a full family membership is \$399. A single adult who lives in the Gables pays \$213; a child or teenager from the area pays \$159.

The city wanted to charge each woman for a separate family membership; each woman gave birth to two of the children.

Abel said the center tries to be accommodating, offering a family plan to single mothers, for example.

After DeTournay and her partner were turned down, they had their attorney, Elizabeth F. Schwartz, send a letter to the city. Schwartz reminded the city of the county human rights ordinance.

“Please let me know how we can work together to be sure that Coral Gables gives the message that it is inclusive and welcoming to all families who wish to enjoy what the city has to offer,” Schwartz wrote.

The city changed its mind Wednesday, Abel said.

“I was pleased that the anxiety of the Coral Gables citizens was worked out in an amicable manner,” said Gables Mayor Don Slesnick. “It was never our intention to misapply the law.”

DeTournay said she hopes the decision will encourage others to fight against discrimination. “I would want to make anyone else aware that there is a law to protect them,” she said.

The ordinance has its detractors. Anthony Verdugo, chairman of the Miami-Dade Christian Coalition, called the Gables case “a wake-up call.”

“It shows this ordinance is being misused and abused to redefine the family as we know it,” he said. “They were never denied access to the youth center. They were simply denied to come in as the category of family.”

The group Take Back Miami-Dade has collected petition signatures in the hopes of putting the question of repealing the ordinance on a countywide ballot.

On the opposing side is SAVE Dade, a gay rights group challenging the petition effort. In April, a Miami-Dade Circuit Court judge upheld SAVE Dade's right to fight the signatures.

Jorge Mursuli, chairman of SAVE Dade, commended the city for changing its policy.

“It's the right thing to do,” Mursuli said. “At the end of the day, the kids are going to participate in the public program. That's what the law does. It erases the barriers.”